## 2006 Annual Report N.C. Million Acre Initiative

Presented to the Governor of North Carolina and the Environmental Review Commission of the North Carolina General Assembly

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By the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources Office of Conservation and Community Affairs

## **The Latest Numbers**

At the end of the seventh full year of the North Carolina Million Acre Initiative (Jan. 1, 1999 – Dec. 31, 2005), private and public land protection partners across the state have permanently protected an additional **405,521** "Million Acre" acres. These partners reported adding **53,431** of those acres during the 2005 calendar year. This is a decrease in the rate of land protection in North Carolina from the previous year.

The Clean Water Management Trust Fund (CWMTF), Natural Heritage Trust Fund (NHTF) and Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) merit special mention in the Million Acres report, as their contribution to conservation is for the most part not shown in the Million Acres report. This is because the credit for acres gained generally goes to the state agencies, local governments and local land trusts with which the Trust Funds work. For example, since 1996, CWMTF and its partners have helped protect 3,612 miles of riparian buffers and helped preserve 317,529 acres of land. Demand for conservation funding is increasing, as shown by the trend in Clean Water Management Trust Fund applications, which in 2005 set new records in both the numbers of requests (237) and the amount requested (\$252 million). The CWMTF was able to award a total of \$112 million to 159 projects in calendar year 2005. Similarly, NHTF awarded \$28 million in 2005, to help protect 19,469 acres. Since 1987, NHTF has funded protection of 228,949 acres of public lands, held by state agencies and open to the public.

The table at the end of this report describes in detail the number of acres protected by sector (state government, local government, etc.), by program and by time period. To avoid confusion, only official reports of new acquisitions (from surveys, interviews and questionnaires) make it into the final total. Estimations for non-respondents are not included.

The lands protected in 2005 represent important natural areas for habitat, recreation opportunities, working forests, and riparian buffers to maintain water quality and protect floodplains, among others. However, the amount of land protected each year is insufficient to meet the goal of permanently protecting an additional million acres by Dec. 31, 2009 (G.S. 113A-240 and 241). In fact, at its current pace, our land protection efforts do not even match

the rate at which open space is being lost in the state, which currently amounts to about 100,000 acres per year. The primary barrier is the availability of public and private funding for new protection projects. If we intend to meet the Million Acre goal by the end of 2009, more money for land protection must be found. The graphic below illustrates progress toward the Million Acre goal.

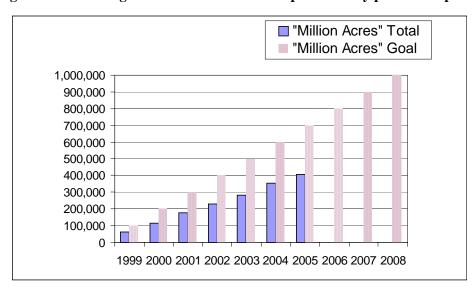


Table 1: Progress toward our goal of one million acres of permanently protected open space

One landmark reached in 2005 was the culmination of a five-year agreement establishing a framework for a partnership between DENR, the North Carolina Coastal Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy, and Weyerhaeuser. The terms of the agreement, a Memorandum of Understanding, established standards for corporate management activity during the five-year period, ensuring that the ecological value of specific natural areas owned by Weyerhaeuser would not be compromised while protection was being negotiated. In addition, Weyerhaeuser offered a right-of-first-refusal option to acquire the areas targeted for conservation, if they were earmarked for sale. DENR's Natural Heritage Program identified 7,804 acres of significant natural areas when it conducted inventories of Weyerhaeuser properties in 1998 and 1999. The inventories also provided a critical scientific assessment of the biological value of lands under consideration. The partners saw the agreement as a landmark in cooperative conservation, giving them a chance to work together over a period of years to identify, plan for, and protect the land. Included in the

land protected as a result of the MOU was over 2,585 acres along Swift Creek and the Neuse River at the Weyerhaeuser Company's Cool Springs and Neuse River Floodplain Tracts in Craven County between Vanceboro and New Bern, where the North Carolina Coastal Land Trust established permanent conservation easements. Together these tracts protect over 9.0 miles of frontage along the Neuse River and Swift Creek.

While this project shows the effort and length of time potentially required to conserve the most important lands, it also demonstrates the conservation benefits. In addition to the natural areas conserved through this collaboration, including longleaf pine and swamp forest habitats, much of the Cool Springs Tract itself is presently managed by the Weyerhaeuser Company as a working forest and as a regional environmental education facility. The Coastal Land Trust worked several years to raise almost \$3 million in public grants to purchase conservation easements on the Cool Springs Tract. Funding for this project was provided by the North Carolina Clean Water Management Trust Fund, the North Carolina Attorney General's Environmental Enhancement Grant, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Legacy Program. As an indication of its commitment to conservation, Weyerhaeuser Company donated a conservation easement on the nearby 927-acre Neuse Floodplain Tract.

## The Program

In addition to working to increase the rate at which land is being protected in North Carolina, the Million Acre Initiative continues to work towards making information about land protection tools and techniques more broadly available, and to encourage conservation planning. The Million Acre Initiative, as part of the One North Carolina Naturally program, and with other partners, continues to slowly but steadily increase awareness among North Carolinians about the need for additional land conservation to protect our valuable natural ecosystems.

The Office of Conservation and Community Affairs has demonstrated its commitment to working lands by assigning a staff position to coordinate and implement working lands protection. The coordinator, based in the Piedmont, will work statewide. Projects already

underway include Soil & Water Conservation and Forestry Information Day events; increasing working lands activity for Districts by assisting with Voluntary Agricultural Districts; encouraging the development of county Agriculture Protection Plans; and working with partners to develop criteria to help identify priority farmlands for conservation.

In the coming months the Million Acre Initiative and the One NC Naturally program will work to implement recommendations from local public input. The One North Carolina Naturally Program continues to work with regions to determine appropriate next steps and to develop implementation strategies for the various regional plans. Specific projects will vary depending on the needs within each region, but in addition to the working lands coordinator mentioned above, the Office of Conservation and Community Affairs has assigned a coordinator for resource-based economic development based in the Mountain region, and another coordinator based in the Coastal region to implement and coordinate the Coastal Habitat Protection Plans (CHPPs).

The Million Acre Initiative itself has identified potential focus areas for reaching the goal in a manner that maximizes benefit to biodiversity conservation. Within the N.C. Natural Heritage Program 'Macrosites' are approximately 3 million acres of unprotected land – areas that contribute to ecosystem function for clusters of natural areas and/or managed conservation lands. These areas include undeveloped and little-degraded lands, as well as farmland and working forests that buffer natural areas and connect habitats. This approach helps focus protection of open space, without specifically targeting one million acres of private land. While the Million Acre Initiative has been working to identify targeted areas for conservation, other planning efforts are underway, including the One North Carolina Naturally initiative and the Wildlife Action Plan.

## **Looking Ahead**

The 53,431 acres permanently protected in 2005 was a disappointingly small step forward, in some respects, and it looks as though 2006 will also be a tough year for new land protection

Assembly did not include any substantial additional funding for land acquisition in 2005. The 2006 Capital Improvements budget earmarked \$15 million for Hickorynut Gorge State Park -- the only land conservation project specified in the budget. The money for Hickorynut Gorge is a good start, as is fully funding the North Carolina Clean Water Management Trust Fund, but with little federal money available, the burden for land protection falls squarely within the State.

In regard to current federal disposition toward conservation lands, one event that occurred in early 2006 demonstrated that the public has strong commitment to land conservation. The President's 2007 Budget for the U.S. Forest Service included a legislative proposal that would sell more than 300,000 acres of National Forest – lands considered 'protected" by most – to continue a federal program that supplements payments to rural schools in heavily forested counties. Almost 10,000 acres were identified for sale in North Carolina, but public outcry prompted Congress to reject the proposed sale. Governor Mike Easley also expressed strong opposition to the sale, writing to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and noting that the proposal came just as the state is working on a long-term strategy to preserve a million acres statewide by 2009. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has indicated that this proposal may return next year, and the State will have to be dedicated to both adding new lands, and remaining vigilant about lands already protected.

As noted in last year's report, it will be difficult to meet the Million Acre goal without a working lands component that helps to maintain local production of agriculture and forest products. Of particular interest would be a dedicated source of funding for conservation of North Carolina's farms and forest lands. There have been numerous suggestions for ways to generate funding, and it is time to examine some of these suggestions more closely.

In building momentum for additional conservation funding, the Land for Tomorrow Coalition was successful in catalyzing Senate Bill 1122, the "Land and Water Conservation Study." This act creates the Land and Water Conservation Study Commission to evaluate current sources of conservation funding, collect information on tools to protect land and water, draft a report

summarizing research and making recommendations, hold public meetings and present to the General Assembly and the Environmental Review Commission on or before Feb. 1, 2007.

Beautiful landscapes, mild climate and hospitable people draw new residents to our State, as does the strong and diverse economy. To be honest, most of us probably take these landscapes for granted. However, North Carolina's population is projected to increase 50% over the next 25 years. At the current rate of development, 4 million new residents will translate to 8 million acres developed. While we can't say for certain how much land will be permanently altered in the next 25 years, it is safe to say that much of the development is likely to occur on lands that currently have forests or farms – destroying open spaces around larger urban areas. In order to ensure the ecological health of North Carolina, we need to not only step up the rate of land protection, but to identify which lands should be conserved, and which lands are best suited for development to accommodate our new residents. As development pressures intensify and land prices increase, so does the importance of protecting our high priority conservation areas, be they wildlife habitats, areas for passive recreation or water quality protection, or places that supply us with food and fiber. Some of the prioritization could be achieved by combining information from sources such as the Wildlife Action Plan, proposed greenways and trails, Significant Natural Heritage Areas, identified priority agriculture and forestry lands, the Land for Tomorrow Coalition five-year plan, Coastal Habitat Protection Plans, buffers for military bases, Million Acre Initiative, ecological 'connectors'/wildlife corridors, etc. into a green infrastructure plan for the One North Carolina Naturally initiative.

The concept of green infrastructure represents an interconnected green space network designed for its natural resource values and for associated benefits to human populations, and such a comprehensive conservation plan can help us see how individual green spaces and working landscapes across North Carolina fit together into an essential network for ecological and public health. The term was coined to elevate the attention of the areas that provide our natural life-support system to the same level as "Gray Infrastructure." What if our local and state government decision-makers put as much effort into planning and protection of green infrastructure as they do into the planning and upkeep of roads, sewer lines, and buildings? With the anticipated influx of new residents, and the importance of open space for the natural

environment and public health, this idea should be given serious consideration. The green infrastructure approach can also emphasize the economic value of protecting natural lands to better communicate this viewpoint to public officials.

Understanding the interrelationships among the priority areas for conservation will help us target our protection efforts so that we maximize the cost effectiveness and the natural protection value of our investment, and improve North Carolina's quality of life. As tens of thousands of acres each year are permanently altered from their existing natural condition for new development, increased awareness about the importance of setting aside some portion of our critical and unique lands is essential. A combination of planning and coordination at the local, regional and state level, with adequate funding incentives to implement the plans, is crucial. The partners listed in the attached summary table will no doubt continue their efforts, and the One North Carolina Naturally program will look for ways to expand land conservation efforts, and make the future greener for our state.